

Second Look

Unconditional War: Hangover from '44

By Herbert Elliston

IT WAS interesting to note the general attention paid last Tuesday to the tenth anniversary of the attempt to kill Hitler and overthrow all his works—a coup which had enlisted many of the top-ranking officers of the German army. But I missed what to me was the central point of the *putsch*. This was the complete absence of any aid from the Allies. Allen W. Dulles had forewarned Washington of the conspiracy from his OSS headquarters at Zurich.



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But a helping hand was withheld. Not that this would necessarily have insured success, but it would certainly have heartened the conspirators and increased their number and importance. To that extent assistance would have enhanced the effectiveness of the July 20 plot.

Lack of Allied interest in an inside job in removing Hitler and his regime was due to the unconditional surrender formula. This was the No. 1 blunder in our war-making—a blunder for which Churchill must accept co-responsibility with Roosevelt. It prolonged the blood-letting needlessly; nine months were required after July 20, 1944, to finish off Hitler. It stiffened the German spine; Goebbels was handed a propaganda present of incalculable value. If we had laid down war terms—in other words, fought our war in a manner justified by common sense as well as by our civilization—Russia would not today be in the heart of Europe.

A SPATE of books have come off the press which seek to justify the unconditional surrender formula. Mainly they derive from British writers, who incidentally, are curiously intent on pooh-poohing the Hitler opposition. The latest of the books is *The Nemesis of Power*, a fascinating panorama of the rise and fall of the German general staff. The writer is J. W. Wheeler-Bennett, the historian who has been chosen as the biographer of George VI. Here is how Mr. Wheeler-Bennett winds up:

The squalid scene in the chancellery bunker, the stark reality of the ceremony in the school house at Rheims, were the fit and necessary conclusion to the evil glory of the Third Reich. Martyrdom and immolation would not have achieved the Allies purpose

In my book this kind of victory was not the material with which to fashion a better peace—the civilized reason for war.

Unconditional surrender amounts to destruction and nothing else. In Germany we left a heap of ruins, together with survivors with no society. There was no law, no constitution—nothing. The victors had no institutional system ready to impose. Only the ingenuity of man brought back a corporate life on rough and ready lines. As an example, the American cigarette was seized upon as a standard of monetary value and a medium of exchange.

WHO LOSES most from making war till the enemy gives in unconditionally—the conqueror or the conquered? The conqueror, of course. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Germany has risen out of the annihilation of defeat with, to say the least, more composure than the conquerors. Our “declared aim of destroying German militarism” (*vide* Mr. Wheeler-Bennett) is so far from being realized that the French and the British are haunted over a return of *furor teutonicus*.

As for ourselves, I saw some unpretty examples in our occupation of the militarization of our polity which triumph brought. I recall driving through the streets of Heidelberg with the visiting Gen. J. Lawton Collins, who, as became his rank as Army Chief of Staff, was given a dashing motorcycle escort. Lightning Joe never acted more swiftly than on this occasion. A cyclist dashed along the sidewalk and scared an old lady out of her wits after nearly knocking her down, and General Collins immediately ordered the whole escort back to headquarters. What happened when Collins was not around troubled me.

Yes, the unconditional surrender formula has much to answer for. If it had not guided our warmaking. I feel sure it would have made a difference to the July 20 plot, hence to our posture in the world and to our society in this year of grace. Alas, we are still hag-ridden by the formula in fulfilling our great power responsibilities. We insist on crushing communism as well as Communist imperialism with a sword. In the words of Gen. J. F. C. Fuller, the military historian, “War has very nearly become a thing in itself—that is, an activity divorced from the very idea of peace, with destruction as its sole aim.”